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Walker, Colin (2019). Aloe spectabilis - a splendid South African species. Haworthiad, 33(3) pp. 58–59.

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Version: Version of Record

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Aloe spectabilis – a splendid South African species

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Aloe spectabilis is a single-stemmed aloe that is endemic to the central part of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I have never grown this species but I encountered it flowering regally at the Jardin de Cactus, Lanzarote in 2016, so this article is based on my observations of that plant. I also provide an update on the current status of this species which has had a slightly turbulent history in terms of its acceptance as a distinct species or its reduction into synonymy under *Aloe marlothii*.

History

Aloe spectabilis was first described by the doyen of aloe students, Gilbert Westacott Reynolds (1937). Alwin Berger had produced the first authoritative monograph of the Alooideae in the 20th century (Berger, 1908) which remained the standard work for several decades. He included the Natal single-stemmed aloes under *Aloe ferox* Miller. Reynolds, in preparatory studies for his monograph, revised the Natal forms and separated these as a distinct species, *A. spectabilis*. He said that "It is a very different species from *A. ferox* Mill. of the Cape, and Berger is incorrect in referring the Natal plants to Miller's species". In his famous monograph Reynolds (1950) naturally adopted his new species.

Half a century later, Glen & Hardy (2000) revised the southern African aloes but they belonged to the "lumping school" and reduced *A. spectabilis* to synonymy under *Aloe marlothii* without any justification. This position was followed by Carter *et al.* (2011) in the body of their book but in their appendix they acknowledged that *A. spectabilis* did indeed justify separate specific status. This revision of status was based on the work of Klopper & Smith (2010) who reinstated *A. spectabilis*. Their justification for two distinct species is as follows: "Overall, plants of *Aloe marlothii* tend to be more robust than *A. spectabilis* in general appearance. *Aloe spectabilis* is a single-stemmed, tree-like aloe up to 5m tall. It is distinguished by its tall, unbranched stem and much-branched inflorescences with very dark brown to almost black peduncles." They highlighted other differences in the flowers that I will describe later. Hence the current position is that *A. spectabilis* is again recognised as a distinct species, endemic to KwaZulu-Natal. Here is a classic example of taxonomy going full circle!

Aloe spectabilis in flower

There are several single-stemmed tree-like aloes from southern Africa (van Wyk & Smith, 2014) of which I grow *Aloe ferox, A. littoralis, A. marlothii, A. pluridens* and *A. thraskii. Aloe spectabilis* has yet to make an appearance in my greenhouse so I was delighted to see this in flower for the first time during a visit to the Jarden de Cactus in the north of Lanzarote in February 2016 (fig. 1). The plant was in an early stage of flowering but the characteristic features of this species were clearly evident. The inflorescence was semi-erect at a slight angle with the flowers densely arranged but evenly orientated along the racemes. In contrast *A. marlothii* has horizontally arranged racemes with secund (one sided) erect flowers. The dark brown peduncle of *A. spectabilis* is shown clearly in fig. 1. The open flowers are clavate-cylindrical in shape, orange-yellow with orange stamens and black-tipped inner tepals (perianth segments), giving them a particularly attractive bicoloured appearance (fig. 2).

The species name '*spectabilis*' means, not unsurprisingly, 'spectacular' and I concur from my single encounter that this is indeed an apt epithet for this plant.

The plant itself is usually single-stemmed up to 3.5m tall. The leaves are dull grey-green up to 1m long and 15cm broad at the base, slightly concave on the upper surface, with prominent marginal teeth and brown spines on both surfaces. The dead leaves are persistent and hang down the stem.

Distribution

Aloe spectabilis, as noted above, is endemic to central KwaZulu-Natal. It grows in open rocky places where the summers are warm to hot with summer rainfall and the winter temperatures can drop to below freezing (van Wyk & Smith, 2014).

Fig. 1. *Aloe spectabilis* flowering at the Jardin de Cactus, Lanzarote.

Fig. 2. Close up of the inflorescence of *Aloe spectabilis*.

Interestingly, this species has become naturalized in another part of South Africa as a large population on the farm Bester Schrik in the Free State. Klopper *et al.* (2010) noted that plants had been brought back to the farm "in a cake tin in 1900. Three plants were planted on a koppie on the farm and have multiplied to more than 30,000 plants".

Other details

This species occurs in large numbers so it is not currently threatened in the wild. Common names include Natal aloe, Natalaalwyn (van Wyk & Smith, 2014) and the Zulu name is umHlaba or imiHlaba (Jeppe, 1969). In southern Africa it is easily cultivated outdoors and makes an excellent garden plant where it can withstand both drought and a certain amount of frost (Bornman & Hardy, 1971). I have yet to try it out under greenhouse or conservatory conditions in darkest Scotland!

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